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THE BLACKGAARD CHRONICLES™



BOOK THREE

CROSS-CHECK



PHIL LOLLAR

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The Blackgaard Chronicles: *Cross-Check*

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For
Hal Smith
and
Walker Edmiston



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CHAPTER ONE



Dr. Regis Blackgaard exploded with fury. “Expelled, Richard?” he shouted. “You got expelled from Campbell College over a lousy grade-changing scheme!”

The speakerphone on Philip Glossman’s desk distorted with the volume of the outburst. Richard Maxwell winced at the sound and stared across the desk at Glossman, who leaned back in his office chair, arms crossed over his potbelly, smiling blissfully at the verbal lashing Maxwell was receiving.

“I thought you were smart—even clever! But apparently you don’t even have any common sense! Why would you do something so idiotic?”

Maxwell shrugged. “Hey, you cut off my extra income from the retirement home, remember?”

“You’ve jeopardized this operation for a little ‘extra income’?”

“I didn’t jeopardize—”

“You could have been arrested! You could have attracted police attention—”

“But I wasn’t and I didn’t, thanks to Whittaker. I knew he’d convince them to not get the police involved.” Maxwell smirked. “He’s a goody-two-shoes like the rest of them—the biggest one of all, in fact. He’s all about giving people second chances.”

Blackgaard’s voice turned deadly. “Well, I am *not* about giving people second chances, Richard.”

Maxwell suppressed the chill that went down his spine. He opened his mouth to respond when Glossman leaned forward and cut in. “Of course, the worst part in all of this is that you didn’t get Applesauce,” Glossman

said. “You didn’t even *try*. And now, you won’t be able to.” He leaned back and smiled once again.

You’re just loving this, aren’t you, councilman? Maxwell thought. *Well, see how much you love this.* . . . He sniffed and said aloud, “Actually, I did try.”

Glossman’s smile evaporated. The speakerphone sat silent. Maxwell tapped on it and said, “Hello? Did we lose you there, Doc?”

“You tried to download Applesauce?”

“Yep.”

“And? What happened?”

Maxwell shrugged again. “I couldn’t do it from that computer.”

Glossman leaned forward and put his hands on the desk. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Back at the warehouse, you said you *could* do it on that computer!”

“*Maybe*,” Maxwell retorted. “I said *maybe* I could do it. Turns out Burglemeister may be a coot, but he’s no dope. He knows his stuff. He wrote in a subroutine that notifies him when the system is being used for purposes other than those for which it was designed.

I had to cover my tracks, so I hid what I did under what Meltsner was doing. That's how Burglemeister nailed him for changing the grades back."

"But you still got caught," Glossman sneered.

"Yeah, well, I thought I had better control over little Nicky," Maxwell replied. "Who knew? The point is I couldn't have used that computer. I'm gonna need a dedicated computer with its own access and a secure, private place to operate it from." He stared at Glossman. "Assuming, that is, that we'll actually *get* such a place. How's the Gower's Landing shopping complex acquisition coming, Glossy? Mansfield Computers still givin' you fits?"

Glossman's face reddened and contorted with rage. He popped out of his chair and started for Maxwell. "You slimy little sneak!" he roared. "I oughta—"

"Sit down, Philip!" Blackgaard commanded.

Glossman stopped and gaped at the speakerphone, then slowly sank back into his chair.

Maxwell was impressed. How did Blackgaard know Glossman had jumped up? Did he have a video camera

in this office? Maxwell restrained himself from glancing around the room as Blackgaard continued.

“He’s right,” Blackgaard said. “We still don’t have the building secured. And now, apparently, we’re going to need it more than ever.”

Glossman tugged at his collar. “I’m meeting with Webster again tomorrow, sir,” he said nervously. “We’ll do everything we can.”

Maxwell chuckled and said, “So far that hasn’t been much.” Glossman started to rise again, but Maxwell put up his hands. “Sorry—cheap shot. Listen, boys, I think I can help you out here.”

Glossman scowled. “You think—”

“Quiet, Philip,” Blackgaard ordered. “Do go on, Richard.”

Maxwell grinned and winked at Glossman, whose face reddened again. Maxwell rose from his chair and paced the room. “Before I came here today, I stopped by Odyssey Retirement Home.”

“Stealing from them again?” sneered Glossman.

Maxwell chuckled. “Oh, no, no. Nothing like that.

I just wanted to say hi to some of the old folks there—particularly one named Mary Hooper. Sad case, really. Her family put her in the home when her husband died. They tried putting her in several homes, actually, but she got kicked out of them all, so they ended up at ORH. Easy to see why: She's not a very nice person. She's grouchy, snippy, and downright mean most of the time—even to kids like my sister's friend Donna. I wouldn't want her living with me, either. She sort of made up with her daughter a few weeks back, but I can tell you firsthand that Mary Hooper does not like her son-in-law. *At. All.*"

"I'm getting bored, Richard," Blackgaard said.

Maxwell slid back into his chair. "While I was at the home, I checked the records, Doc. Found out two very interesting things. Y'know, they really need to improve their security. I mean, it *is* private information, after all—"

"The *point*, Richard!"

Maxwell smiled. He knew he shouldn't do it, but he loved testing Blackgaard's patience. It was so easy.

“First, ORH has quite a few code violations—*city* code violations.”

Glossman sat up.

Maxwell’s smile broadened, and he leaned in toward the speakerphone. “And second: Mary Hooper’s son-in-law . . . is Bob Mansfield . . . owner of Mansfield Computers.”

There was a pause. Glossman’s eyes darted alternately between the phone and Maxwell. When a deep chuckle wafted through the speaker, the councilman smirked unctuously in spite of himself.

“Very good, Richard,” Blackgaard intoned. “A recovery from your blunder at the college.”

Maxwell thought about sneering at the phone, but then he remembered the hidden camera and instead just nodded graciously and smiled.

Blackgaard went on: “You know what to do with this information, Philip?”

“I can think of one or two things, yes,” Glossman replied, still smirking.

“Richard, get Philip the specifics on what you will

need computer-wise. If this is handled properly, we can kill two birds with one stone.”

Maxwell couldn't help twisting the knife. “That's a big *if*,” he said. “Need any help with that, Glossy?”

Glossman's smirk faded. “I'll handle it on my own, thanks.”

Blackgaard's voice turned dark. “Make sure you do, Philip.”